Places That Made Me

Big Sur, Esalen, and Santa Cruz

Nikki Craft - November 20, 2025

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A note on this document: this essay is part of an ongoing biographical and archival record, not a polished personal essay in the conventional sense. It includes specific, sometimes tangential detail — names, places, dates, minor memories — because the purpose is documentation for the historical record while the author is alive to verify it, not literary economy. Readers looking for a tighter narrative may wish to read selectively; nothing here is filler.

The photograph at the top of this page captures a period in my life when I was at the height of my physical strength and self-possession — a time defined not by recklessness, but by a very specific form of survival. This is where I slept, inside my pickup truck pulled to the edge of the ocean air each night, and where I built the body that has carried me through everything since.

In this image, you can see the physical truth of those years: grounded posture, open chest, alert presence, and the subtle but unmistakable balance of someone who lived in a near-constant dialogue with the natural world. The surrounding landscape — dry golden hills, open coastline, the Pacific breathing behind me — reflects the internal landscape I lived in then: expansive, intense, alive. And even here, at rest in these hills, I am wearing a political button, most likely against the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, where I was preparing to be arrested and organizing to bring others down to do the same. Even in my place of restoration, the work was pinned to my chest — though during this period, that work was secondary. What came first was the ocean, the swimming, the nature I lived inside of every day.

During this era, I swam every day in cold Santa Cruz water — around 60° to 65°F — often a mile at a time, to the end of the pier and back.

Nikki Craft swimming at Andrew Molera Beach, Big Sur, 1982.

In Big Sur, where the opening photo of this essay was taken, I swam parallel to seals and once beside a sea otter who rose into a massive kelp bed only a foot away, its back toward me, before turning, gasping, and slipping back into the blue water. I've swum through huge schools of tiny fish that moved with my body like a shimmering energy field, sunlight flashing on their scales as pelicans dove down and scooped them up only feet away. I've swum in open waters all over the world, always aware that sharks lived beneath those same surfaces. None of this was thrill-seeking. It was how I regulated myself. Cold water, long-distance endurance, immersion in open nature — these were not escapism but medicine.

This wasn't extremism for its own sake. It was adaptive. It was how I kept myself intact during years of deep activism, danger, and pressure. Some people burn themselves out with self-destructive extremes. Mine were life-giving. Every mile I swam in those waters strengthened the metabolic resilience that still shows up in my body today. My lungs, my stamina, my capacity to take on decades of work — all of that was built here.

It's easy now to forget that I spent years of my youth in extraordinary physical health, with daily habits that protected my organs, regulated my nervous system, and created cellular resilience I still rely on at this age. I ate vegetables, swam oceans, walked coastlines and ridges, slept in fresh air, and lived inside a body that was fully alive.

This photo is proof that I did not come into later life from a place of weakness but from a foundation of power — a foundation that is returning now as I rebuild and heal. When I look at this picture, I see not a lost time, but a continuity. That person — strong, clear, elemental — is not gone. She is the reason I am still here.

Nearly Every Beach

I spent time and swam at beaches and waters all along this coast — from Año Nuevo and Santa Cruz down through Point Lobos, Molera Beach, Pfeiffer Beach, the Big Sur River Gorge, and Esalen, where I went daily when I lived in Big Sur, then farther south along the coast toward San Diego. That included private beaches as well, though certainly not literally every beach..

North of Santa Cruz, 1980s.

North of Santa Cruz, 1980s — Nikki Craft among the elephant seals at Año Nuevo.

One of the most vivid memories from those years happened at Pfeiffer Beach, at the far end near the cypress trees, where we used to nude sunbathe.

I went swimming there alone around midnight. I had been drinking and using drugs — not the smartest thing I've ever done. Pfeiffer Beach's water is bone-cold and invigorating year-round, and the beach is known to be genuinely dangerous for swimming because of powerful rip currents. I was swimming among the waves and beyond them as if I were in a swimming pool, not paying enough attention, when I looked up and understood what was happening: I was being pulled out to sea by a fairly strong current.

But I was a very strong swimmer then. I had swum against river currents in Rancho Cordova, and in 1979 I swam with the current in the Stanislaus River during the week Mark Dubois chained himself to a rock to protest the New Melones Dam. At that time, I could tread water and hold my breath for an astonishing length of time. I was as at home in water as I was walking on land. I maneuvered easily through the waves and swam back to shore. It remains one of my most pleasurable memories, and the water that night was incredible.

Bill Webb and Stack o' Wheat

My younger sister Darlene visited me in California. The photo on the left was in San Francisco and the photo on the right was the beautiful day we spent up the top a ridge in Big Sur at Bill's house..

William "Bill" Webb, a libertarian book distributor and publisher connected to the Henry Miller literary circle, later the author of *Henry & Friends: The California Years, 1946–1977* (Capra Press, 1991). I was working for Bill at the time he was building his house and helped him lay the cement walkway around the property. He had burned off the land and I helped him clear the brush and got the worse case of poison ivy I have ever had. I was moving boxes of books around in his storage room and organizing it for him.

It was through that world that I came to work for Bill Webb, sorting inventory in his storage room late at night. Alone there, I first came across the Les Krims "Stack o' Wheat" prints — staged photographs of women posed as murder victims, presented as fine art. I was so infuriated that I folded one of the promotional packages in half, leaving a crease down the middle. I felt bad about it — it was Bill's property, not mine to damage — and I stopped myself from destroying it further. Years later, when I carried out the Stack o' Wheat protest action at the university library, I already had that history behind me. Bill Webb himself gave me a set of the prints to take back to the library. That is the set I donated to UC Santa Cruz Special Collections, and the copy that sits there today still bears the crease my hand put in it.

I had spent months living at Emil White's house when I first came to Big Sur; White, Henry Miller's closest friend, who kept a Wilhelm Reich Memorial Library there. I brought Lee Baxandall — who had translated and edited Wilhelm Reich's work into English, and who was a founder of the modern naturist movement — to that library when we visited Big Sur together.

The truck where Craft often slept in Big Sur, open to the air and ocean.

Big Sur: Sleeping, Recovery, and Work

This is where I most often slept in Big Sur — the back of my truck pulled out and fully open to the sky, the water, and the fresh air, most often alone, with my Argentine special under my pillow and Casper and Squirt, my two puppies from Texas, always at my side.

This is where I came to recover after the Kitty Genovese Women's Project; where I wrote *Drifting from the Mainstream*; and where I worked for a year as executive supervisor over housekeeping — head maid — at the Ventana Inn, to pay off the project's expenses. The day we were to have 25,000 copies delivered, the check from COYOTE bounced. I had to borrow a thousand dollars from my mother to cover it — every dollar of which I paid back over the year that followed, working as a maid at minimum wage. No rest for the weary is pretty much how I felt. I was very burned out from doing the KGWP for the prior year.

After working for Bill, I got a job at the Ventana Inn. Ventana was Big Sur's original corporate luxury resort, built in 1975 by Hollywood producer Lawrence Spector on profits from *Easy Rider* — 160 acres of redwood forest and Pacific coastline, known for its clothing-optional Japanese baths and a standard of housekeeping so exacting it helped justify the hotel's rates. I worked there for roughly nine months to a year. Locals often hated Ventana. I grew up working class, and this was my first introduction to truly rich people.

While I worked at Ventana, I lived in a trailer in the redwood forest below the Inn. Many days after work, we went to Pfeiffer Beach to sunbathe. It was extraordinary to live in a redwood forest with access to actual luxury, while also living straight out of a John Steinbeck novel. We would climb straight up a hill to go to work, then walk into the hotel and drink fresh-squeezed, cold orange juice and eat warmed, buttered croissants. We bathed and showered in the spa, and at night we had open access to the pool and baths. We learned how little it actually took to survive living out of trucks, tents, and trailers. At the same time, we learned how little interest many people with money had in knowing anything about such things. Those were lessons I carried forward as fuel for a lifetime of activism.

Mexican migrant workers in the restaurant were living behind the building in conditions I saw with my own eyes. I went there with a friend and saw the rooms myself: squalor, overcrowding, workers packed into spaces no hotel guest would ever have been expected to tolerate. When immigration came around, they would run down the hill, go back to Mexico for a few weeks, and then return. It was common knowledge, and all the risk fell on them, not on the people profiting from their labor. I went out of my way to see those conditions, and I understood them at the time for what they were: exploitation of workers. Once, my supervisor, who was from Georgia, said to me, "Nikki, you behave all too often around Ventana like you are a union organizer, and we don't have a union at Ventana." He was right about what he was seeing in me.

There were darker things around that luxury too. At night, screams traveled across the valleys from the ridge above the Inn, where Spector lived. Those sounds filled the night, and they have haunted me ever since. I did not yet have the power, clarity, or documentation I would later learn to gather, but I knew I was seeing and hearing something profoundly wrong. Years later, when public trouble surfaced around that family, I tried to report what I remembered, even calling TMZ, but no one called me back.

The hotel guests included the Baron and Baroness de Rothschild, whose room I cleaned, alongside numerous film stars and other wealthy guests. Bob Denver — Gilligan, from *Gilligan's Island* — left peanut shells scattered by the hundreds across the bed and cabinets of his room; I found it funny. Werner Erhard stayed there as well. I cleaned his room while he talked, in the room, about psychology in militaristic terms that repelled me. His closet held what I would estimate as a hundred shirts, hung and

organized precisely by color — the first time I had ever seen anything like it. He had about twenty pairs of polished shoes lined up perfectly on the floor. He was only staying at Ventana for two days.

That year of cleaning up after the wealthy did a great deal to radicalize me on the subject of economic disparity. I came to that work with a working-class history and understanding already shaped by earlier experience. And there I was inside their rooms, their closets, their mess, seeing up close what money did and did not buy in the way of character. The lesson was not abstract. It was physical, repetitive, intimate, and impossible to miss. Wealth at that level was not simply comfort; it was entitlement built on other people's labor. It is a straight line from that year to the plain political position I hold now without apology: billionaires should not exist. Their hoarding of the world's resources, their entitlement, and their predatory power are helping destroy the earth itself. I have learned to hate billionaires, and I advise others to do the same.

We also had all the Dom Pérignon we could drink, and for about three months I took small amounts of psilocybin mushrooms every day — never enough to hallucinate, just enough for energy and pleasure in that natural environment, and to get through the mundanity of cleaning up after the rich. I had accidently discovered microdosing — sub-perceptual doses, an antidepressant, never enough to hallucinate, and it improved the quality of my work.

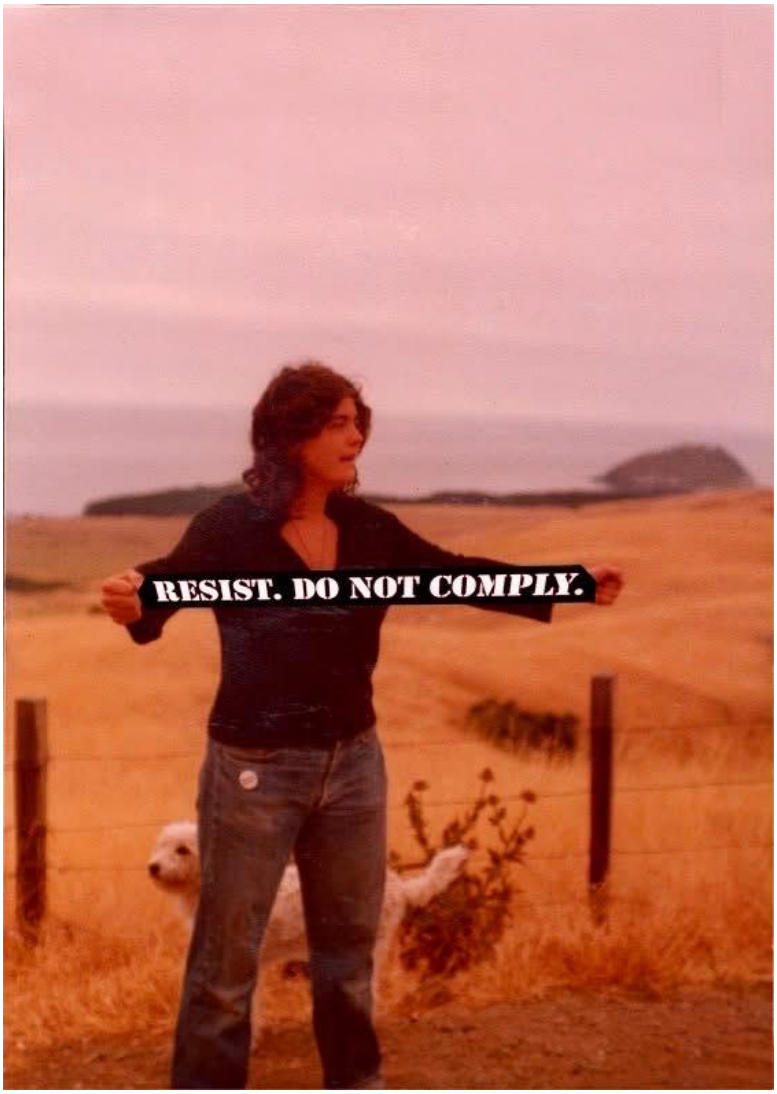
At the gorge in Big Sur. Photograph by Susan Caudill's friend.

Inside the camper with Casper and Squirt. Photograph by Susan Caudill

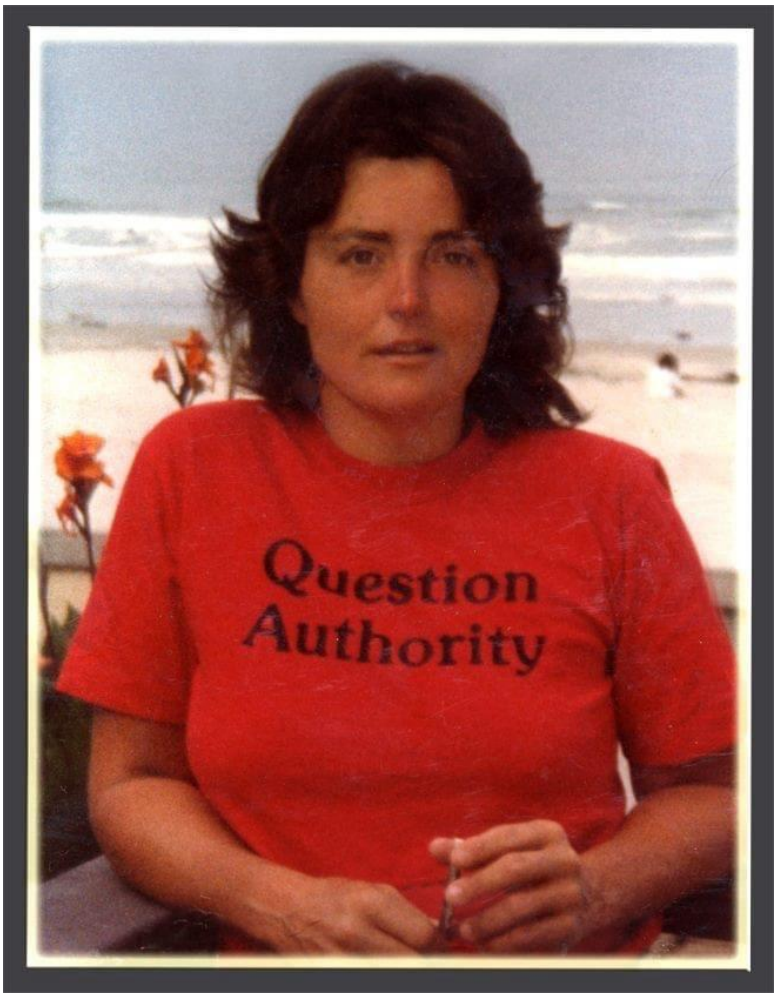
In the lower-left corner of the camper photograph is the large brown briefcase I used at the time as a filing cabinet. It held Kitty Genovese Women's Project materials, writings connected to *Drifting from the Mainstream*, and legal information related to my arrest at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant. The photograph preserves not only a moment of rest with friends and dogs, but also the mobile archive and working life I carried with me.

Susan Caudill of KERA television and her wonderful friend - someone I remember fondly, though I regret that I no longer remember her name after all these years - came to visit me in Big Sur. We visited the Big Sur river gorge and had a magical day. Casper and Squirt, my little pipsqueak, were with us, and we all slept in the camper. Susan had also been present at the Loiter-in I organized in the Oaklawn area roughly three years earlier. The photo at the top of this page was taken by Susan Caudill; the gorge photograph below was taken by her friend. y.

The final portrait was taken not in Big Sur but in San Diego, and it closes this piece deliberately, in a different place and a different key, with the spirit that runs through all of it: Question Authority



Banner added much later when I learned photoshop skills.



Beach portrait in a "Question Authority" shirt. San Diego.